

AMERICAN LITERATURE

Literature in the Jazz Age

1920–1929

After World War I, American literature—like American jazz—moved to the vanguard of the international artistic scene. Many American writers remained in Europe after the war, some settling in London but many more joining the expatriate community on the Left Bank of the Seine River in Paris, where they could live cheaply.

Back in the United States, such cities as Chicago and New York were magnets for America's young artistic talents. New York City gave birth to the Harlem Renaissance, a blossoming of African-American culture named for the New York City neighborhood where many African-American writers and artists settled. Further downtown, the artistic community of Greenwich Village drew literary talents such as the poets Edna St. Vincent Millay and E. E. Cummings and the playwright Eugene O'Neill.

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

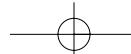
The foremost chronicler of the Jazz Age was the Minnesota-born writer F. Scott Fitzgerald, who in Paris, New York, and later Hollywood rubbed elbows with other leading American writers of the day. In the following passage from Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*, the narrator describes a fashionable 1920s party thrown by the title character at his Long Island estate.

By seven o'clock the orchestra has arrived, no thin five-piece affair, but a whole pitful of oboes and trombones and saxophones and violins and cornets and piccolos, and low and high drums. The last swimmers have come in from the beach now and are dressing up-stairs; the cars from New York are parked five deep in the drive, and already the halls and salons and verandas are gaudy with primary colors, and hair shorn in strange new ways, and shawls beyond the dreams of Castile. The bar is in full swing, and floating rounds of cocktails permeate the garden outside, until the air is alive with chatter and laughter, and casual innuendo and introductions forgotten on the spot, and enthusiastic meetings between women who never knew each other's names.

The lights grow brighter as the earth lurches away from the sun, and now the orchestra is playing yellow cocktail music, and the opera of voices pitches a key higher. Laughter is easier minute by minute, spilled with prodigality, tipped out at a cheerful word. The groups change more swiftly, swell with new arrivals, dissolve and form in the same breath; already there are wanderers, confident girls who weave here and there among the stouter and more stable, become for a sharp, joyous moment the center of a group, and then, excited with triumph, glide on through the sea-change of faces and voices and color under the constantly changing light.

Suddenly one of these gypsies, in trembling opal, seizes a cocktail out of the air, dumps it down for courage and, moving her hands like Frisco, dances out alone on the canvas platform. A momentary hush; the orchestra leader varies his rhythm obligingly for her, and there is a burst of chatter as the erroneous news goes around that she is Gilda Gray's understudy from the Follies. The party has begun.

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925)



◀ EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

In the 1920s, Edna St. Vincent Millay was the quintessential modern young woman, a celebrated poet living a bohemian life in New York's Greenwich Village. The following quatrain memorably proclaims the exuberant philosophy of the young and fashionable in the Roaring Twenties.

My candle burns at both ends;
It will not last the night;
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—
It gives a lovely light!

—Edna St. Vincent Millay, "First Fig,"
from *A Few Figs from Thistles* (1920)

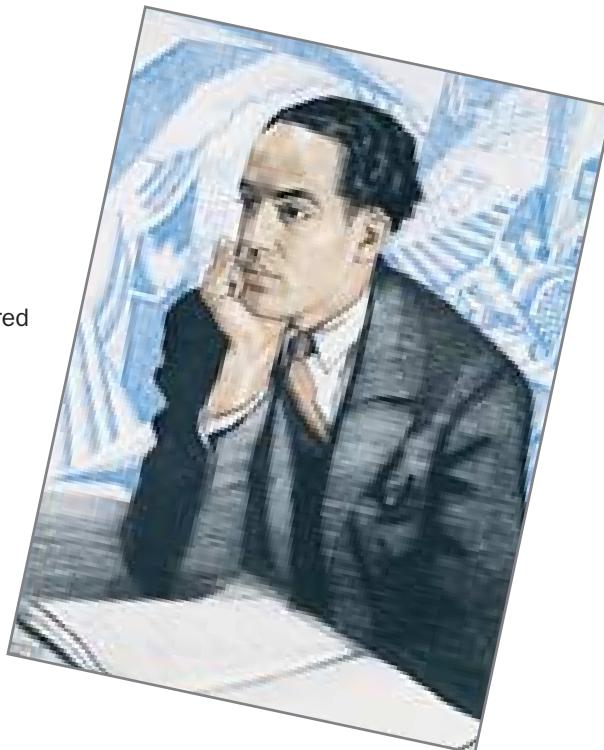
LANGSTON HUGHES ►

A towering figure of the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes often imbued his poetry with the rhythms of jazz and blues. In the poem "Dream Variations," for example, the two stanzas resemble improvised passages played and varied by a jazz musician. The dream of freedom and equality is a recurring symbol in Hughes's verse and has appeared frequently in African-American literature since the 1920s, when Hughes penned this famous poem.

To fling my arms wide
In some place of the sun,
To whirl and to dance
Till the white day is done.
Then rest at cool evening
Beneath a tall tree
While night comes on gently,
Dark like me—
That is my dream!

To fling my arms wide
In the face of the sun,
Dance! Whirl! Whirl!
Till the quick day is done.
Rest at pale evening . . .
A tall, slim tree . . .
Night coming tenderly
Black like me.

—Langston Hughes, "Dream Variations,"
from *The Weary Blues* (1926)



THINKING CRITICALLY

1. **Comparing** What connections can you make between the literary and music scenes during the Jazz Age?



SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R8.

2.  **INTERNET ACTIVITY** CLASSZONE.COM

Visit the links for American Literature to research writers of the Jazz Age. Then, create a short report on one writer's life. Include titles of published works and an example of his or her writing style.